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# BLACK OCTOBER

## Comics, Memory, and Cultural Representations of 17 October 1961

Claire Gorrara

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**ABSTRACT:** The brutal police repression of the demonstration of 17 October 1961 stands as a stark reminder of the violence of French colonialism. A continuing official reluctance to acknowledge these traumatic events has led individuals and groups to seek alternative routes for recognition. This article explores one of these alternative routes: the comic book, and specifically *Octobre Noir*, a collaboration between writer Didier Daeninckx and graphic artist Mako. By analyzing the reframing of 17 October 1961 within the comic form, this article argues that *Octobre noir* offers a site for interrogating the relationship between history and memory. This is achieved by exchanging a cultural narrative of police brutality and Algerian victimization for a narrative of legitimate protest and Algerian political agency. *Octobre noir* exemplifies the value of the comic book as a vector of memory able to represent the past in ways that enrich historical analysis and interdisciplinary debate.

**KEYWORDS:** 17 October 1961, comics, colonialism, Didier Daeninckx, memory

The events of 17 October 1961 have come to stand as a reference point for debates on the extent and nature of French colonial violence.\* The brutal police repression of a demonstration of Algerian protesters on the streets of Paris that day cast the violent endgame of the Algerian War into sharp relief.<sup>1</sup> Years later, the process of bringing such memories to public attention has proved traumatic. As historians, cultural commentators, writers, and filmmakers have repeatedly asserted, active obfuscation of the events by the French state has led individuals and groups to seek alternative routes for recognition. This article will explore one of these alternative



routes: *Octobre noir*, a comic book collaboration between writer Didier Daeninckx and graphic artist Mako (Lionel Makowski). Published in 2011 on the fiftieth anniversary of the demonstration, *Octobre noir* can be read as a critical intervention in the process of coming to terms with this episode in French colonial history. It demonstrates the potential of popular culture to communicate narratives of historical events that are partially present or missing from official accounts.<sup>2</sup> By analyzing the reframing of 17 October 1961 within the comic form, this article will argue that *Octobre noir* offers a site for the interrogation of the relationship between history and memory, achieved by using the graphic format to align the reader with the perspective of those who took part in the demonstration. In so doing, this comic book shifts the focus away from a narrative of police brutality and Algerian victimization towards a narrative of legitimate protest and Algerian political agency. Ultimately, *Octobre noir* exemplifies the value of the comic book as a cultural vector of memory, representing the past in ways that can enrich historical analysis and stimulate interdisciplinary debate.

In this article, I will begin by examining the challenges involved in representing the events of 17 October 1961 and the role played by creative works in confronting the historical occlusion of the demonstration.<sup>3</sup> The article will then compare Didier Daeninckx's representation of the demonstration in his best-selling crime novel *Meurtres pour mémoire* (1984) with *Octobre noir* (2011). It will analyze the different narrative strategies and choices attendant on the transition from the novel to the comic form. The article will then evaluate the medium-specific features of *Octobre noir* as a comic book and the impact of a documentary aesthetic that re-imagines events from the perspective of the demonstrators. It will end by assessing *Octobre noir* and popular culture more broadly as sites of protest. Understanding how far 17 October 1961 remains a politically charged episode in French history demonstrates the potential of the comic book to act as a mediator for voices that have been silenced in the cultural record.

## Narratives of 17 October 1961

The demonstration of 17 October 1961 took place in the dying days of the Algerian War as French and Algerian authorities sought to consolidate their positions in advance of closing negotiations. As Jim House and Neil MacMaster point out in their study of 17 October 1961, this was a period when draconian policies of policing and control that had operated in colonial cities and towns were being promoted by leading civil servants and enacted through the structures of the French government and admin-

istration in the metropole.<sup>4</sup> Maurice Papon, police prefect of Paris from 1958 to 1967 and previously prefect of Constantine in Algeria from 1956 and 1958, was central to the circulation of such violent policing techniques. Papon was committed to the defense of the empire. His ideological beliefs, forged during the Second World War as a Vichy civil servant, were representative of a *cadre* of government ministers, politicians, civil servants, and military leaders willing to blur the boundaries between the functions of the police and the military function of the state. The techniques of policing which he sponsored would be legitimized as a response to law and order concerns during the Algerian War. Therefore, as House and MacMaster assert, the events of 17 October 1961 need to be framed within a broader context of state violence, perfected in the colonies and championed by leading French state functionaries.

The demonstration was organized to respond to a night time curfew of all “français musulmans d’Algérie” in early October. This curfew had been introduced by the prefecture of police in Paris, under orders from Papon, to disrupt Algerian nationalist groups who had organized attacks on French police officers in the preceding months. The curfew could not legally prevent Algerian workers from circulating in Paris and the wider Parisian region. However, it did “advise” Algerians to “abstain from movement at night” between 8:30 p.m. and 5:30 a.m.<sup>5</sup> The French police interpreted this edict widely as mandatory and as justification for further harassment of Algerian nationals. The French federation of the Front de libération nationale (FLN) organized a protest to overturn the curfew and demonstrate the scale of its support in France. Over 20,000 men, women, and children—nearly a quarter of the Algerian population living in Paris and the surrounding region—converged on symbolical sites in Paris.<sup>6</sup> The crowds were met with unprecedented levels of police brutality. Officers beat and killed demonstrators on the streets, throwing their dead and dying bodies into the Seine to wash up on the banks of the river. Police arrested and held protestors in detention centers that had, in some instances, housed Jewish families rounded up in July 1942. In the immediate aftermath of the demonstration, official police reports announced three deaths (two Algerians and one “European”), sixty-three wounded and 11,538 arrested. Two days later, Algerian women held a demonstration to call on the French government to demand information about the whereabouts of their loved ones who had not returned. A small number of photographers and journalists recorded the events they witnessed on the streets on 17 October, leading to some coverage in mainstream and radical newspapers, such as the left-wing, anti-colonial *France-Observateur*. Countries such as the USA, Britain, and Germany, receiving media reports from overseas, openly critiqued the demonstration on the international

stage. The *New York Times* devoted its front page to the demonstration on 18, 19, 20 October. The articles discussed the number of fatalities and the potential political consequences for de Gaulle and his government. The East German *Frankfurter Rundschau* focused on the French policy of internment in Algeria while highlighting the peaceful nature of the demonstration and the FLN's success in making visible its demands for independence.<sup>7</sup> However, within France, government censorship stifled the news of the 17 October events for the weeks and months to come.<sup>8</sup> Over the next twenty years, these events were the subject of debate, controversy, and obfuscation, in part due to officials' reluctance to address the broader history of French decolonization. Questions of intergenerational transmission grew in significance as second and third generation authors, such as Leila Sebbar, gained literary exposure for their nuanced treatment of the relationship between the demonstration and notions of history, memory, and culture.<sup>9</sup> Yet, in the immediate aftermath of events, memories of 17 October 1961 went "underground," maintained only by associations such as migrant youth groups, for whom the events had come to represent a meaningful collective memory.

From the early 1980s, the movement to reinsert 17 October 1961 into French cultural memory gained momentum. Social organizations like SOS Racisme highlighted this episode as part of the 1983 "Marche de l'Égalité." Committed historians Jean-Luc Einaudi and Michel Lévine proved instrumental in challenging the historical community to engage with this unacknowledged past.<sup>10</sup> State reckoning with the 17 October 1961 surfaced unexpectedly at the trial of Maurice Papon for crimes against humanity in 1997–1998. In his role as a Vichy civil servant, Papon was accused by French prosecutors of complicity in the deportation of thousands of Jewish families from Bordeaux to Auschwitz via Drancy. In court, Papon's career as a high-ranking administrator in colonial Algeria and his tenure as the police prefect of Paris emerged as a trial within a trial. Prosecutors and historians, including Einaudi, testified to his oversight of the 17 October 1961 demonstration and its repression. The trial raised uneasy parallels between the French state's complicity in the Holocaust and state-sanctioned colonial violence during the Algerian War. As Michael Rothberg notes, through the figure of Papon, the events of 17 October 1961 became "the connective tissue" between these seemingly disparate histories.<sup>11</sup>

Following the Papon trial, the French government provided the first limited access to police and military archives. The archives were partially opened in 1997 under Minister of Culture Catherine Trautmann and Interior Minister Jean-Pierre Chevènement as an attempt to quash concerns over government collusion in covering up the demonstration. A small number of specialists provided reports, but with disparate conclusions on

the numbers of casualties and different theories of culpability. The 1998 Mandelkern report, commissioned by socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, offered perhaps the most critical assessment of police culpability, but contested claims that hundreds of Algerians had died. Government appointed historian Jean-Paul Brunet even went so far as to claim bands of special forces officers, acting outside standard procedures, were responsible for demonstrator deaths.<sup>12</sup>

Today disputes over the numbers of fatalities continues to hamper research. There remains no narrative of the demonstration which all parties accept. Since the 2000s, commemorative ceremonies have offered the opportunity for reflection and community building. In 2001, Paris's mayor, Bertrand Delanöe, placed a plaque on the Pont Saint-Michel, a site from which police had thrown Algerian demonstrators to their deaths. But this was a gesture of municipal rather than national remembrance. It was not until 2012, on the fifty-first anniversary of the demonstration, that President François Hollande acknowledged the French state's culpability.<sup>13</sup> In the face of such belated, partial, and inconsistent narratives of the events from authorities, other memory texts have, as Lia Brozgal asserts, offered "an alternative form of epistemological work."<sup>14</sup>

In the absence of agreed official accounts, other circuits of memory have begun to address the presence of 17 October 1961 in French cultural memory. Commentators have frequently evoked the catalyzing role of creative works in bringing the demonstration to public attention.<sup>15</sup> For if there were few opportunities for demonstrators, witnesses, and their families to formally testify to the events of 17 October 1961 in the immediate aftermath, alternative narratives were being produced. Jacques Panjel's documentary film *Octobre à Paris* (1962) was released in Paris cinemas but screened for only a few weeks before being seized by the police. In 1963 American expatriate writer William Gardner Smith published *The Stone Face*, told from the fictional perspective of an African American in Paris who witnesses the demonstration first-hand. In this novel, Gardner makes connections between histories of racialized violence in the USA and in the French colonies in the early 1960s.<sup>16</sup> By the 1980s and 1990s, the novel had become a particularly fertile genre for narrating the events of 17 October 1961 and contesting the partial nature of accounts in the public realm.

Key to this reopening of the past were the second-generation Franco-Algerian children whose stories inspired and encouraged others to speak out about the events of 17 October 1961. Comparisons can be drawn between this form of memory resurgence and the "miroir brisé" phase described by Henry Rousso in his now seminal work on the Vichy syndrome and the Second World War in France.<sup>17</sup> In Rousso's collective memory model, a younger generation of authors in search of connection with

a dark past challenges the silences and omissions of their parents' generation. Like their Second World War counterparts, second-generation Franco-Algerian authors and filmmakers have produced works that can be usefully explored via the prism of "post-memory"—a critical framework developed by Marianne Hirsch in relation to the Holocaust, which refers to "a structure of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience" from a survivor generation to their descendants.<sup>18</sup> Hirsch's post-memory has proved productive for historians researching the cultural remediation of 17 October 1961 by writers a generation removed from the events.<sup>19</sup>

The prominence of visual and inter-medial creative works and their contribution in representing this contested past has also recently generated research. After an initial "amnésie du visuel"<sup>20</sup>—both symbolically and pragmatically redolent of the events' invisibility in the public domain—visual media have offered new avenues to engage with 17 October 1961, from animated short films, to web documentaries, music videos, and comics.<sup>21</sup> Via open access digital platforms, such creative forms reach beyond national boundaries and often take the form of counter-narratives, contesting received interpretations and marking the lacunae or selectivity of official accounts.<sup>22</sup>

These literary and visual works can be understood as the most recent incarnation of an "anarchive" of the 17 October 1961 events. Conceptualized by Lia Brozgal, the anarchive "is not located in any single text but rather designates a set of works that evince an archival function and that, together, produce an epistemological system in oppositional relationship to an official archive."<sup>23</sup> The "anarchive" is constituted by texts that violate the rules (anarchy), are produced outside official channels, and challenge the hegemony of state-sponsored narratives. Produced from the margins, the "anarchive" reflects what cannot—or has not yet—been seen or recounted. In this article I will argue that *Octobre noir* works as an "anarchive" in that it functions to expose the blind spots of official narratives. In the album, Daeninckx and Mako act as "anarchival" interpreters of 17 October 1961. They propose ways of seeing the past that differ significantly from Daeninckx's earlier evocation of the events of 17 October 1961 in *Meurtres pour mémoire*.

### Connective Histories: From *Meurtres pour mémoire* to *Octobre noir*

Didier Daeninckx has a reputation for producing fiction that probes the underbelly of French history. He has exposed the horrors of trench warfare

in the First World War, criticized the human zoos of the Colonial Exposition of 1931, and highlighted the persecution and mistreatment of minority groups in France and its former colonies.<sup>24</sup> As the son of anti-colonial activist parents and himself committed to an open and tolerant society, Daeninckx is an author immersed in debates about France's colonial legacy and its impact on contemporary society. From the start of his career, the events of 17 October 1961 have played a prominent role in his cultural remapping of France's past. His second novel *Meurtres pour mémoire* (1984) has been credited with bringing this episode into the literary mainstream.<sup>25</sup> Daeninckx's decision to weave the events of 17 October 1961 into a plot centered on the persecution and deportation of Jews from France during the Second World War made his particular treatment of 17 October 1961 so innovative. This deliberate entanglement of traumatic pasts prompted readers to consider the commonalities between these treatments of marginalized social groups during national crises. Daeninckx used generic conventions of the crime novel to bring memories of the Holocaust and the Algerian War into dialogue, an example of what Michael Rothberg has termed multidirectional memory, "the productive interplay of disparate acts of remembrance."<sup>26</sup>

The events of 17 October 1961 are central to the first two chapters of *Meurtres pour mémoire* as three protagonists converge on the Bonne Nouvelle metro station at 7:25 p.m. on 17 October 1961. Saïd Milache and Kaira Guelanine are the young adult children of recent immigrants to France, whilst Roger Thiraud is a Latin and history *lycée* teacher whose wife is expecting their first child. In these first two chapters, Daeninckx fleshes out the lives of the three protagonists who will all be dead by the end of chapter two. He provides a compelling back story for Saïd and Kaira, sketching out the challenges of living in the *bidonvilles* of Paris in the early 1960s. However, it is Roger Thiraud who narrates the bloody repression of the demonstration in the third person, as a horrified bystander and observer. With such an exteriorized viewpoint, the fictional trajectories of Saïd and Kaira are lost and the narrative disconnects with them mid-demonstration. The reader is led to believe that the French authorities kill them, as the characters' experiences are merged with those of the larger crowd of demonstrators. Neither character plays a further part in plot development, bar a fleeting face (possibly Kaira's) seen in "lost" film footage of the demonstration viewed in Belgium by the detective, Inspector Cadin.<sup>27</sup> This re-visioning of the demonstration from abroad offers an ex-centric location from which to consider the sole remaining trace of the demonstration, suggesting that the cultural record can only be recovered beyond France's borders.

Presenting what has not been recorded in official accounts, the events of these opening chapters do not feature in the remainder of the book.



Instead, the novel focuses on the murder of Roger's son, Bernard Thiraud, its investigation by Inspector Cadin over twenty years later, and the suppression of the wartime history of the town of Drancy. The revelation of this dark past pivots on the career of fictional civil servant André Veillut who is complicit in the deportation of Jews from Toulouse to Auschwitz via Drancy. Veillut, like his scarcely disguised real-life counterpart Maurice Papon, is police prefect of Paris in 1961 and oversees the repression of the demonstration. As the historian-detective of the novel, Cadin brings to the surface layers of repressed memories that challenge a teleological understanding of national history and its legacies.<sup>28</sup> However, the force of the novel is directed at exposing French state collusion in the Holocaust and not at making visible the events of 17 October 1961. As Anne Donadey concludes, "While Daeninckx's novel deals with the erasure of French memory, it has little to say about immigrant memory and thus unwittingly participates in the continued silencing of the October 1961 massacre."<sup>29</sup>

*Octobre noir* tackles this silencing head on, as the comic book recounts events entirely from the perspective of immigrant demonstrators. Published in September 2011, *Octobre noir* was released to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the demonstration. Produced by a small independent publishing house, Editions Ad Libris, the comic book was commissioned by the editor as a homage to his own father who had taken part in the demonstration.<sup>30</sup> As Daeninckx himself reveals in an interview, it was also the fruit of nearly thirty years of reflection and his personal commitment to breaking what he terms "le plafond de verre," which he believes has prevented the development of a shared history of the demonstration.<sup>31</sup> Ad Libris, now defunct, specialized in educational texts for young adults, and *Octobre noir* is likewise aimed at young adult readers. The album has been profiled on revision sites for the Baccalaureate to support students working on decolonization under the Fifth Republic.<sup>32</sup>

*Octobre noir* is also the product of Daeninckx's long-standing collaboration with graphic artist Mako (Lionel Makowski).<sup>33</sup> With a preface by historian Benjamin Stora, entitled "une mémoire retrouvée dans les eaux noires de l'oubli," the album ends with a list compiled by Jean-Luc Einaudi of the "morts et disparus à Paris et dans la région parisienne." These contributions mark the album's endorsement from historians known for their willingness to challenge state-sponsored narratives of the Algerian War. The album also concludes with the re-publication of a short text by Daeninckx, "Fatima pour mémoire," written in 1986 on the twenty-fifth anniversary of 17 October 1961 and originally published in *L'Humanité* and *Actualités de l'émigration*. This short piece recounts Daeninckx's contribution to the recuperation of the memory of Fatima Bédar, a fifteen-year-old girl from an Algerian immigrant family who died at, or in

the aftermath of, the demonstration. Her brothers and sisters were unaware of the circumstances of her death, as it was presented to the family as a suicide by the French authorities. By foregrounding the comic's commemorative function via the date of publication, its paratextual endorsements, and the identification with one family's tragedy, Daeninckx and Mako align the comic with the viewpoint of the lost or disappeared of 17 October 1961 and an "anarchival" account of events.<sup>34</sup>

*Octobre noir* marks a significant shift from *Meurtres pour mémoire* in terms of its representation of the events of 17 October 1961. There is no appropriation of the history and memory of the demonstration by a figure of state authority, in this case Inspector Cadin. Indeed, the complicity of the French state is assumed and questions of state perpetration and culpability are of secondary importance.<sup>35</sup> Instead, what emerges is the representation of the demonstrators as legitimate protesters, not silent victims of state crimes. This is channeled via the perspective of the main protagonist Mohand/Vincent, the adult son of a first-generation migrant family to France. By night, he is Vincent, the lead singer of The Gold Star, a rock and roll band tipped for success and on the verge of winning a bandstand style competition. By day, he is Mohand, the brother of Khelloudja, the son of recent immigrants to France, living in the Saint-Denis district of Paris in cramped rooms above a café. The comic sets out in some details the lives of members of the North African community in Paris in the early 1960s and their significant contribution to post-war French economic success. Mohand is a reluctant demonstrator on 17 October 1961, after his father insists he takes part as his duty to his family and community. Torn between a bandstand competition on the same evening and the march, Mohand/Vincent arrives at the demonstration in its latter stages. With his rock and roll clothes and slicked back hair, the police mistake him for "French," and he witnesses the police brutality first-hand. It is his resemblance to—and indeed deliberate appropriation of—an American style that saves him but comes to haunt him as an indictment of his lack of intervention.

Following the demonstration, Mohand (and not his American alter ego Vincent) searches Paris for his sister Khelloudja who, despite her family's interdiction, has joined the demonstration. In the mode of Inspector Cadin from *Meurtres pour mémoire*, Mohand interviews three witnesses: two Algerian demonstrators and a French trainee military doctor who recognizes Khelloudja as one of the youngest internees being held at the Parc des expositions following mass arrests. Khelloudja's body is recovered from the Saint-Denis canal on 20 October 1961 and identified by Mohand via her long plait of hair, a visual trope she shares with the photograph of Fatima Bédar, reproduced in Daeninckx's postface. This provides a visual

echo of the real lives upon which the narrative is based. On 21 October 1961, at the bandstand final, Vincent (not Mohand) begins The Gold Star's set by reciting Kateb Yacine's now famous protest poem "La Gueule de loup, 17 octobre 1961."<sup>36</sup> In these final panels, protest poetry and rock and roll music fuse to denounce the collective silence of the French people about the events of 17 October 1961. This reconfiguration of 17 October 1961 pivots on the medium-specific features of the comic form and the use of a documentary mode.

### Comics and Reframing Representations of 17 October 1961

According to comic scholars Jennifer Howell and Mark McKinney, *Octobre noir* is the most extended treatment of the events of 17 October 1961 to date in French comics.<sup>37</sup> A small number of French comic books have addressed 17 October 1961 in the broader fictional history of Franco-Algerian relations, but no other comic has reflected in such detail on the demonstration.<sup>38</sup> In her discussion of *Octobre noir*, Jennifer Howell focuses on the importance of the paratext as a cultural mediator, determining how the comic should be read. For Howell, such material promotes the comic's historical verisimilitude, disrupting the distinction between fictional story and historical reconstruction. As she argues, *Octobre noir* is committed to bridging the gap between historical account and subjective perspective, making use of shifts in narrative voice to invite "readers to participate as both actors and narrators with respect to their national history."<sup>39</sup> Overall, Howell accentuates the comic's effect of encouraging readers to feel empathy with the individual Algerian protagonists and their place within the narrative universe of 1961 Paris. Certainly, the extensive paratextual material is key to understanding the comic as both a fictional account of the demonstration and a *lieu de mémoire*.<sup>40</sup> In the preface, historian Benjamin Stora comments upon "le passage des douleurs privées à la mémoire collective" and the important work that fiction performs to "compléter notre connaissance de cet événement tragique."<sup>41</sup> At the end of the album, Einaudi's list of 389 missing and deceased makes clear the extent of the devastation. Amongst these names are ninety "inconnu Français musulman d'Algérie," whose anonymity calls readers to consider the experiences of demonstrators still lost or undetected in cultural memory. Sandwiching the comic narrative between Stora's denunciation and Jean-Luc Einaudi's chilling list gives a moral weight to the album that it would not otherwise assume.

Visual strategies are central to *Octobre noir's* mission to expose the disjuncture between official accounts and the perspective of the demonstrators.



Figure 1. Didier Daeninckx and Mako, *Octobre noir*. Source: Anthy-sur-Léman: éditions ad libris, 2011, 38. Reproduced with the kind permission of Didier Daeninckx.

Marianne Hirsch describes this disjuncture as the “biocularity” of comics, their capacity not only to operate at the intersection of the verbal and visual, but also to make visible the tensions involved in depicting traumatic events.<sup>42</sup> Such contrasts and contradictions are evident in the panels that depict the opening moments of the demonstration (Figure 1). As the melodious strains of Vincent/Mohand’s French version of Gene Vin-

cent's "Be Bop a Lula" float over the rain-soaked street scenes in descriptive boxes, two rectangular and two square panels show a stark contrast between the demonstrators and the opposing police forces. The first panel positions the reader at ground level, walking behind (and as one of) the demonstrators, who are depicted from below, as legs and lower torso. In the next panel, the riot police confront the reader from waist level upwards, some with their faces covered in goggles. The page then sets two panels in a "face off" across the panel gutter, as ordered, stern-faced officers look over at a mixed group of male and female demonstrators who seem unaware of such scrutiny. The contrasting effect is striking. The demonstrators appear as "the walking dead," zombie-like in their march towards what appears certain death. This juxtaposition of visual perspectives—a history from above and a history from below—serves to challenge any univocal or totalizing history of the demonstration.

Daeninckx and Mako make use of a documentary mode to reframe the cultural record in ways which privilege the agency of the demonstrators and act as an injunction to read and see events differently.<sup>43</sup> In *Octobre noir*, the documentary mode surfaces as Mohand/Vincent conducts interviews with individual witnesses. In the days immediately following the demonstration, Mohand/Vincent crisscrosses Paris to collect the testimonies of those who took part—both Algerian and French. The narrative presents this as a listening process, through which demonstrators willingly and eagerly recount their experiences to a receptive interlocutor. Mohand/Vincent listens in cafés, hairdresser shops, and abandoned mobile homes, all of which are drawn to highlight the unsanitary living conditions of the Algerian community. Such sequences insert the demonstration into a broader French history of migrant laborers and their poor treatment. These scenes are interspersed with flashbacks that reconstruct the demonstration from multiple demonstrator viewpoints. The depiction of an oral tradition of testimony casts into sharp relief the misreporting of official accounts, a situation that Mohand/Vincent's father attributes to an institutional refusal to recognize the facts of the events: "Bientôt il n'y aura plus que du mensonge à la radio, dans les journaux, à la télévision."<sup>44</sup> In contrast, as an emergent community leader, Mohand/Vincent functions as a "témoin pollinisateur," a pollinator of testimony, inspiring and supporting others to speak out.<sup>45</sup> In so doing, *Octobre noir* promotes a narrative of agency and the political coming of age of a generation of demonstrators and their families.

Visual strategies are once again key to representing the demonstrators as political agents. In *Octobre noir*, Daeninckx and Mako make use of a realist aesthetic that, as Daeninckx confirmed in interview, draws upon authentic documents from the period, such as the photographs of Robert

Doisneau.<sup>46</sup> Such photographic realism legitimizes the comic book's narrative of events and allows Daeninckx and Mako to introduce micro-histories and personal vignettes that prevent an overly schematic interpretation of the demonstration as French police versus Algerian demonstrators.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, the album includes many photographic-like portraits of Algerian demonstrators, and, in some cases, reproductions of actual shots of demonstrators taken by photographer Elie Kagan on the night.<sup>48</sup> In doing so, the creators refuse the statistical anonymity of those who perished which has often dominated discussion and instead recognize the protesters' diversity as a community. By representing the demonstrators visually as rounded subjectivities, *Octobre noir* disables what Rebecca Scherr sees as a common tendency in Western eyes to read the suffering of racialized others in ways that collapse their distinctiveness as subjects.<sup>49</sup> By forcing a visual engagement with the many demonstrators, *Octobre noir* presents them as proud, dignified individuals in a moment of mass protest against discrimination.<sup>50</sup>

*Octobre noir's* re-contextualization of the events of 17 October 1961 within the medium-specific features of the comic book relies on a realist aesthetic but also on recurrent tropes. As Jan Baetens argues in his article on Spanish comics and representations of the Hispanic colonial past, recurrent visual motifs offer layered readings that complicate a sequential and linear representation of history. Baetens terms these motifs "etymons," which he describes as "defining visual figurations through which a work can be read in its entirety."<sup>51</sup> In the case of *Octobre noir*, one defining etymon is the railway bridge. Prior to the demonstration, in the early pages of the comic, Mohand/Vincent witnesses two plain-clothed policemen kill an Algerian character, Omar, under a railway bridge. This sequence acts as a *mise en abyme* for the violence to come. It is also beneath a railway bridge that Khelloudja's body is dragged from the canal on the penultimate page of the comic. As an etymon, the railway bridge stands for the routes of migration between France and Algeria and the transient lives of the Algerian protagonists.<sup>52</sup> It also highlights the multidirectional connections with the history of the Holocaust given the train track's function as a metonym for the deportation of millions to the extermination camps. In the narrative economy of the text, it also symbolizes the "in-between-ness" of Mohand/Vincent. As an urban feature that connects locations but is located nowhere, the railway bridge represents the liminal status of Mohand/Vincent, caught between France and Algeria. In Daeninckx's fictional universe, this "in-between" character acts as a conduit to voice legitimate protest and political agency.

## Sites of Protest

Daeninckx and Mako choose to filter their comic book narrative through a protagonist who sits at the intersection of cultures, identities, and nationalities. As defined by Mark McKinney, Mohand/Vincent is *frontalier*: “An individual or groups living on the symbolic frontier between societies positioned as antagonistic or as visibly different.... Marginal with respect to their society, these individuals are central to the inter-societal conflict and to zones of common reference constructed by and in spite of this conflict.”<sup>53</sup> As both witness and activist, Mohand/Vincent provides the opportunity to reflect on the possibilities for legitimate protest and agency from an in-between space. He straddles the borders—real and imagined—between France and Algeria and a third space: American popular culture and music. Mohand/Vincent’s ability to “pass” as French accentuates the extent to which national identities can be performed and deconstructed. His ventriloquism of Gene Vincent and the Blue Caps’ “Be Bop a Lula,” in French translation, highlights the capacity of popular music to act as a cultural mediator, bringing together different cultures in a medium open to interpretation and adaptation.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, as the comic demonstrates in its final panels, popular music offers a frontier space where transnational histories of conflict come into contact and where new political voices, such as that of Mohand/Vincent, can gain traction.

Creating a legitimate space in which to protest is a dominant theme in *Octobre noir*. Official investigation or reporting of the events is absent from the comic, indicating that the demonstrators have no legitimate status as subjects of justice. They do not have the right to participate in the political arena as voters, nor do they have access to the justice system to air their grievances. Instead, *Octobre noir* emphasizes the centrality of the cultural sphere as an alternative space where Algerian protesters can speak out. Oral history and life writing, poetry and popular music constitute the possibility for what Nancy Fraser has termed “participatory parity.”<sup>55</sup> This is evident in *Octobre noir* in the protest poem of Algerian writer Kateb Yacine. First published in June 1962 as a denunciation of the demonstration and its silencing in France, “La Gueule de loup: 17 octobre 1961” makes direct comparisons between the 17 October 1961 demonstration and moments of popular insurrection memorialized in French national history. The poem, as reproduced in *Octobre noir*, sets the demonstration alongside the French Revolution, the Paris Commune, and the wartime French Resistance: “de vomir à la face/du peuple de la commune/ces corps martyrisés/qui rappelaient aux Parisiens/leurs propres révolutions/leurs propres résistances.”<sup>56</sup> Here multidirectional memory places 17 October 1961 in dialogue with republican history in the name of human rights and

social justice. As with the documentary mode of the comic, Mohand/Vincent's recital of the poem challenges the invisibility of the demonstrators and asserts the validity of their experiences. Through this poem, *Octobre noir* denounces an official framing of events that refuses the protesters a political voice and makes them silent victims. Instead, the comic acknowledges the value of popular culture—in its myriad forms—as a means for the demonstration to force its way into French cultural memory.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has explored the capacity of the comic book form to offer a politically charged reframing of the events of 17 October 1961. As has been argued, this comic re-narrates the story of 17 October 1961 from the “blind spot” of the demonstrators who are routinely depicted as the voiceless victims of police brutality. Whereas the conclusion to Daeninckx's earlier novel, *Meurtres pour mémoire*, suggests a reburial of history, as the fictionalized police prefect of Paris is exonerated, in *Octobre noir* this ending is overturned. The comic book moves away from a narrative of covering up the past to one of excavation, allowing the demonstrators and their families to take center stage. This is achieved by the mobilization of a testimonial process and realist aesthetic that refuses the flattening effect common in Western representations of racialized others. Instead, the documentary mode positions the demonstrators as political subjects. In addition, by creating a *frontalier* protagonist, *Octobre noir* thematizes the notion of “in-between-ness” and highlights the challenges of finding a political voice. This political voice is eventually heard in the cultural sphere, as protest music and poetry denounce the excision of the demonstration from the public record. In so doing, Daeninckx and Mako induct *Octobre noir* into the protean “anarchive” of 17 October 1961. Indeed, *Octobre noir* demonstrates the capacity of creative works to speak for demonstrators whose ability to be recognized as equal citizens via normal forms of social and political representation has been limited or non-existent.<sup>57</sup> In this way, *Octobre noir* exemplifies the aspiration for comics to act as cultural forms that can address some of the most pressing debates and issues of our times.

More broadly, as we distance ourselves from grand narratives in the writing of history, comics offer a way to democratize an interdisciplinary study of the past. Comics form part of a diverse and often neglected set of cultural materials. In a documentary mode, they offer a means to explore the relationship between history and memory, between lived experience and representation, and to confront official accounts with what Judith



Butler, in her work on the frames of war, terms “the discarded negative of the official version”—those lived experiences that have been excluded from conventional frames of representation.<sup>58</sup> For Butler, such marginalized perspectives have the potential to act as sites of resistance. By integrating comics into our re-imaginings of the past, we can engage with often underrepresented social actors and readers, thereby nuancing historical meaning and reshaping the contours of cultural memory.

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## Notes

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1. The terms used to describe the demonstration are part of the cultural politics of memory. For some, the term “massacre” is used; for other historians, the date is the reference point. The latter will be my approach, although I accept that this term neutralizes the ethical imperative to look at the violent nature of the police response. See Joshua Cole, “Massacres and their Historians: Recent Histories of State Violence in France and Algeria in the Twentieth Century,” *French Politics, Culture & Society* 28, 1 (2010): 106–126, for a reading of the demonstration within a wider history of French and Algerian relations.
2. For an assessment of comics, history, and memory, see Hugo Frey and Benjamin Noys, “Editorial: History in the Graphic Novel,” *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 6, 3 (2002): 255–260. As Frey and Noys make clear in their editorial, different terms are used to define the text/image narratives at the heart of this article: comics, comic strip, graphic novels, *bande dessinée*. I have chosen comic book. This takes account of the cultural history of Anglo-American comics scholarship and highlights the format of *Octobre noir* as a single and complete book or album.
3. See Chadia Chambers-Samadi’s *Répression des manifestants algériens: la nuit meurtrière du 17 octobre 1961* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2015) for an exploration of the role of literature and film in the construction of a collective memory of the events of 17 October 1961, above all in the form of autobiographical and fictional testimonies.
4. See Jim House and Neil MacMaster, *Paris 1961: Algerians, State Terror and Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

5. Ibid., 100.
6. See Emmanuel Blanchard, "Derrière le massacre d'État: ancrages politiques, sociaux et territoriaux de la 'démonstration de masse' du 17 octobre 1961 à Paris," *French Politics, Culture & Society* 34, 2 (2016): 101–122 for a re-assessment of the demonstration. Blanchard places the demonstration within the context of the FLN's broader strategic objectives and organizational structures in France.
7. See Ibid., 113–115, for an overview of international press opinion on the demonstration.
8. As Michael Rothberg has noted, the events of October 1961 were also "screened" from public view by other events in the history of Algerian decolonization, above all the deaths of nine anti-colonial demonstrators at Charonne metro station in February 1962. See Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 359.
9. See Leïla Sebbar, *La Seine était rouge: Paris, octobre 1961* (Paris: Thierry Magnier, 1999).
10. See Jean-Luc Einaudi, *La Bataille de Paris: 17 octobre 1961* (Paris: Seuil, 2001) and Michel Lévine, *Les Ratonnades à Paris: un meurtre collectif à Paris en 1961* (Paris: Ramsay, 1985).
11. Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 228.
12. See Jean-Paul Brunet, *Police contre FLN: le drame d'octobre 1961* (Paris: Flammarion, 1999).
13. See Katelyn Knox, "Rapping Postmemory, Sampling the Archive: Reimagining 17 October 1961," *Modern and Contemporary France* 22, 3 (2014): 381–397 (382) on the use of the passive tense in President Hollande's recognition speech, side stepping questions of state violence and guilt.
14. Lia Brozgal, "In the Absence of the Archive (Paris, 17 October 1961)," *South Central Review* 31, 1 (2014): 34–54, 35.
15. See, for example, Anne Donadey, "Anamnesis and National Reconciliation: Remembering 17 October 1961," in *Immigrant Narratives in Contemporary France*, ed. Susan Ireland and Patrice J. Proulx (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001): 47–56, and Michel Laronde, "'Effets d'histoire': représenter l'histoire coloniale foreclose," *International Journal of Francophone Studies* 10, 1–2 (2007): 139–155.
16. See Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 246–263.
17. Henry Rouso, *Le Syndrome de Vichy: de 1944 à nos jours* (Paris: Seuil, 1990).
18. Marianne Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," *Poetics Today* 29, 1 (2008): 103–128, 106.
19. A representative sample of these texts would include: Nacer Kettane, *Le Sourire de Brahim* (Paris: Denoël, 1985); Mehdi Lallaoui, *Une nuit d'octobre* (Paris: Éditions Alternatives, 2001); Ahmed Kalouaz, *Les Fantômes d'octobre* (Paris: Oskar, 2011); and Hamid Aït-Taleb, *De grâce* (Paris: J-C Lattès, 2008).
20. Laronde, "Effets d'histoire," 144.
21. See Philippe Brand, "Des nœuds dans le web: la commémoration du 17 octobre 1961 sur internet," *Entrelacs*, for discussion of web documentaries; Knox, "Rapping Postmemory" for music videos; Jennifer Howell, *The Algerian War in French-Language Comics: Postcolonial Memory, History and Subjectivity* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015); and Mark McKinney, *Redrawing the French Empire in*

- Comics* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 2013) for discussion of comics and graphic novels.
22. See, for example, the web documentary *La Nuit oubliée*, hosted by *Le Monde* newspaper: [http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/visuel/2011/10/17/la-nuit-oubliee\\_1587567\\_3224.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/visuel/2011/10/17/la-nuit-oubliee_1587567_3224.html).
  23. Brozgal, "In the Absence of the Archive," 50.
  24. See respectively: *Le Der des ders* (1985), *Cannibale* (1998), and *Le Facteur fatal* (1990).
  25. Didier Daeninckx, *Meurtres pour mémoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984).
  26. Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 309.
  27. Daeninckx, *Meurtres pour mémoire*, 105–107.
  28. See Charles Forsdick, "'Direction les oubliettes de l'histoire': Witnessing the Past in the French *Polar*," *French Cultural Studies* 12, 3 (2001): 333–350, for an analysis of the archaeological metaphors used in the novel.
  29. Donadey, "Anamnesis and National Reconciliation," 50.
  30. The editor, Aïssa Derouaz, dedicates the album as follows: "à ma mère, à mon père, à tous les anonymes, manifestants pacifiques et leurs familles; à tous ceux qui leur ont porté assistance, soutien, eux aussi anonymes, tous acteurs du 17 octobre et des jours suivants."
  31. See Daeninckx's interview on the comic book for the magazine of the Musée de l'histoire de l'immigration in June 2014: <http://www.histoire-immigration.fr/magazine/2014/6/octobre-noir>.
  32. See <http://blog.letudiant.fr/bac-fiction/2012/04/12/revisez-le-bac-avec-la-bd-octobre-noir-de-didier-daeninckx-et-mako/>.
  33. Daeninckx has worked extensively with graphic artists, such as Jacques Tardi, to adapt his own novels. He is also a script writer for separate comic projects. His collaboration with Mako goes back to the early 1990s and they have, to date, worked on over a dozen collaborative projects, including *La Main rouge* (Anthy-sur-Léman: Editions Ad libris, 2013). This addresses the political legacies of the Algerian War in the shadow of 9/11.
  34. French rapper Médine in his song "17 octobre" (2006) and in the on-line video takes a similar perspective by adopting the viewpoint of a demonstrator who dies on 17 October 1961. See <http://genius.com/Medine-17-octobre-lyrics>.
  35. There is one passing reference to Maurice Papon in a conversation between police officers as the demonstration begins. See Didier Daeninckx and Mako, *Octobre noir* (Anthy-sur-Léman: Editions Ad libris, 2011), 33.
  36. This sequencing is historically inaccurate as this poem first appeared in the journal *Jeune Afrique* in June 1962 and would not, therefore, have been known to Mohand/Vincent in 1961. However, this poem is intended to mark the political coming to consciousness of Mohand/Vincent and this may explain Daeninckx's decision to make use of it for dramatic effect.
  37. See McKinney, *Redrawing the French Empire in Comics*, 207, and Howell, *The Algerian War in French-Language Comics*, 52. Panels from the comic have been reproduced in the web documentary *La Nuit oubliée*, hosted by *Le Monde*, cited previously, blurring the distinction between documentary and fiction.
  38. McKinney, *Redrawing the French Empire in Comics* cites Baru, Jean-Marie Thévenet and Daniel Ledran's *Le Chemin de l'Amérique* (Paris: Casterman, 1990) as a comparable comic book treatment. Otherwise, McKinney refers to edited comic book collections and anthologies that have been published to coincide with notable anniversaries of the demonstration.

39. Howell, *The Algerian War in French-Language Comics*, 56.
40. I would like to thank one of the anonymous referees for this insightful comment and suggestion.
41. Daeninckx and Mako, *Octobre noir*, 12.
42. See Hirsch's comments cited in Rebecca Scherr, "Framing Human Rights: Comics Form and the Politics of Recognition in Joe Sacco's *Footnotes from Gaza*," *Textual Practice* 29, 1 (2015): 111–131, 117.
43. See Nina Mickwitz, *Documentary Comics: Graphic Truth-Telling in a Skeptical Age* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) for an analysis of the documentary comic as a cultural form mediating events in the real world.
44. Daeninckx and Mako, *Octobre noir*, 52. The lack of reference to news reporting of the day is a choice that Jennifer Howell attributes to the authors' indictment of the wide-ranging French censorship in the immediate aftermath of the demonstration. Howell, *The Algerian War in French-Language Comics*, 89.
45. See Béatrice Fleury and Jacques Walters, eds. *Carrières de témoins de conflit contemporains (3): les témoins réflexifs, les témoins pollinisateurs* (Lorraine: Université de Lorraine, 2013) for an analysis of the figure of the "témoin pollinisateur."
46. See Daeninckx's interview: <http://www.histoire-immigration.fr/magazine/2014/6/octobre-noir>.
47. In interview, Daeninckx recounts how he and Mako drew real-life anti-colonial activists and left-wing intellectuals into the comic. These included François Maspero, left-wing publisher, writer, and translator, and Stéphane Hessel, diplomat, activist, and author of the best-selling essay on human rights, *Indignez-vous* (2010).
48. See Daeninckx and Mako, *Octobre noir*, 33. Kagan's photographs are some of the most widely circulating images of 17 October 1961. See Jean-Luc Einaudi and Elie Kagan, *17 octobre 1961* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2001).
49. Scherr, "Framing Human Rights," 126–127.
50. See Blanchard, "Derrière le massacre d'État," 111, for a reading of the demonstrators in their Sunday best as an affirmation of community pride, contesting negative stereotyping of Algerians living in France.
51. Jan Baetens, "History against the Grain: On the Relationship between Visual Aesthetics and Historical Interpretation in the Contemporary Spanish Graphic Novel," *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 6, 3 (2002): 345–356, 356.
52. See Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995) for a ground-breaking analysis of the intersection of decolonization and modernization in France in the immediate post-war decades. The role of cars (and other modes of transport) as real and metaphorical carriers of values and ideals is central to Ross's thesis.
53. McKinney, *Redrawing the French Empire in Comics*, 4.
54. See Leila Ennaili, "Galadio de Didier Daeninckx et la question de l'identité nationale," *Modern and Contemporary France* 23, 1 (2015): 17–33, who argues that Daeninckx's fiction of recent years can be read as a riposte to the controversial debate on French national identity, launched by the Sarkozy government in 2009. Like Daeninckx's *Galadio* (Paris: Seuil, 2010), with its Senegalese/German protagonist (Galadio/Ulrich), *Octobre noir* challenges a monocultural and nationalistic interpretation of French national identity.

Belonging is not defined along racial and ethnic lines but comes with commitment to republican and humanist values and ideals.

55. See Nancy Fraser, "Reframing Justice in a Globalising World," *New Left Review* 36 (2005), <https://newleftreview.org/II/36/nancy-fraser-reframing-justice-in-a-globalizing-world>. As Fraser asserts, misrepresentation can occur "when the community's boundaries are drawn in such a way as to wrongly exclude some people from the chance to participate *at all* in its authorised contests over justice." *Octobre noir* positions its Algerian protagonists as "misrepresented" within the realm of political rights and social justice.
56. Daeninckx and Mako, *Octobre noir*, 54.
57. Other creative works that can be cited include short animated film *Octobre noir ou Malek, Said, Karim et les autres* made by La Fabrique Productions (2011). See <http://en.unifrance.org/movie/33341/october-1961>.
58. Judith Butler, *Frames of War* (London: Verso, 2010), xiii.